

Ask a Priest!
June 7, 2021

Question: Why are women not allowed to become Catholic priests or deacons?

Answer: It's worth distinguishing overlapping topics: the Church's view of men, of women, of motherhood, and of priesthood – to name a few. The Church has a deeper understanding of each of these than do many people today; so a short answer here may prove difficult. The teaching that man or woman is excluded from being mother or priest is based on the Church's view of that role in itself, and is not intended as a disdain for men (who are “not allowed” to be mothers) nor for women (who are “not allowed” to be priests). If I fully grasp what is meant by “mother” or by “priest”, the rest follows; the challenge is that we do not fully grasp each of these topics - especially in times of ideological slant.

The short answer is rooted in the priesthood more than in any “lesser esteem” for woman. Jesus, like the Church he inaugurated, was more open to women than the cultural trends in his own time period; and yet His comments on the priestly role show that it was something intended for his 12 Apostles who were intentionally male, even while they were always accompanied by women followers who were not Apostles. The Blessed Mother—the most perfect human person—was not one of the 12 Apostles and therefore is not a priest; and she feels no disdain.

Following her Master, the Church guided by that Spirit of Christ has maneuvered through 2000 years of changing ideological extremes, whether periods of male chauvinism, ultra-feminism, or gender confusion. (Note that in today's reigning ideology, not only do we feel that women are “being denied their right to be priests”, but we perceive a disdain for being a nun and likewise an under-estimation of “motherhood” as if this were no more than a burden opposed to the success of a “self-realizing career”. Perhaps that ideology is impeding our view of these gifts of motherhood and priesthood. Missing their essence, we can't understand the rules or privileges that would otherwise flow from that essence.)

Following centuries of alternating extremes, today the Spirit shows mankind—through the Church—a very high esteem for woman, perhaps higher than any other worldwide religion. (Some Catholics or priests may fall into the sin of male-chauvinism; but they are failing as Christians and as priests if they do so.) The Church likewise holds an extremely high estimation for the gift of motherhood, of masculinity and of femininity, but without ever changing its “rule” that man cannot be a mother. Similarly, the Church's view of the priesthood is that,

especially with its unique elements imitating God's "fatherhood" and Jesus Himself who intentionally assumed the physiological qualities of a man, the priesthood can only be filled by men—and particularly celibate men.

God is not a God of "sameness", and there is a lot of diversity in His creation and in His Church. Men and Women have different roles to occupy—equal in dignity, but not called to sameness.

The Church affirms the greatness of woman, of man, of motherhood, and of priesthood, and many other roles; but she intends no disdain by saying that not all roles are equally for men or for women.

As the ideological pendulum has swung to a more widespread appreciation for the woman's role as a leader in society (at times today even a shift towards the disdain for a man's role), the Church herself is increasingly supportive of leadership roles being entrusted to women, including serving at the Altar, finances, the evaluation of clergy, etc. However, the view of the priesthood itself still entails an element that is uniquely masculine.

A helpful link: <https://www.catholic.com/tract/women-and-the-priesthood>

Also the catechism, beginning at n. 1577:

https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/___P4X.HTM

And at Catholic Answers:

<https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/why-cant-women-be-priests>

and <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/why-no-womens-ordination>